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FM AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6205
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0563
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SENSITIVE
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FOR WHA/FO TSHANNON AND WHA/CEN JFEELEY AND BDOHERTY
ALSO FOR WHA/PDA MPROCTOR

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: CONTROVERSY OVER MANDATORY HONDURAN GOVERNMENT
BROADCASTS FADES BUT UNDERLYING PROBLEMS REMAIN

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 923

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Honduran President Mel Zelaya decreased the number of government mandated broadcasts, which he originally ordered on May 23, 2007, from ten to three amid intense public controversy among broadcasters, political leaders, and civil society (reftel). The government propaganda, initially planned for two hours a day for ten days, occurred just three times on May 28 and 30 and June 1 for one hour or less each time. The Zelaya Administration defended the broadcasts by claiming that the press was minimizing the President's accomplishments by sensationalizing reports on crime and violence and thereby discouraging economic investment and development in the country. However, his three media appearances only addressed national telephone, energy, and tax related issues. In the context of Chavez' actions against RCTV in Venezuela, most public attention was focused on the decision to require government broadcasts in the first place rather than their content. In this determined attempt to confront "powerful centers" such as the media, the Zelaya Administration miscalculated public reaction in a losing game to gain popular support. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On May 23, 2007, President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya ordered private television and radio stations to broadcast a series of ten simultaneous broadcasts for two hours each from May 28 to June 7 (reftel); however, under intense public scrutiny he later reduced the number to three shorter broadcasts. The Zelaya Administration argued that the broadcast transmissions mandated by the Government of Honduras (GOH) were permitted according to a 1995 telecommunications law. Although the National Commission of Telecommunications in Honduras (CONATEL) usually allows for only seven minutes of non-emergency government broadcasting at a time, CONATEL President Rasel Tome defended their legitimacy and argued they were not endangering any form of free speech. Tome later announced that, if media stations did not air the complete broadcasts, they would face fines from CONATEL.

¶3. (SBU) The first government broadcast on May 28, which was shortened to an hour in length, began with Zelaya's defending his decision to require the broadcasts. Accompanied by Tome and Marcelo Chimirri, Acting Administrator of HONDUTEL and a self-described mafia type leader, President Zelaya then turned to problems at the state-owned telephone company HONDUTEL and answered questions from two reporters invited by him to attend. The second broadcast on May 30 for half an hour focused on problems at the National Electric Energy Company ENEE. The President was accompanied by Minister of Defense Aristides Mejia, Labor Minister Rixi Moncada, and

Finance Minister Rebeca Santos, with questions from journalists friendly to the Administration. The final broadcast on June 1, which also lasted for a half hour, dealt with issues at the Honduran tax collection agency DEI.

¶4. (SBU) Foreign Minister Milton Jimenez, who may be the one behind Zelaya's media blitz, led a meeting with the press and diplomatic corps on June 1 attended by EmbOff in which he made further legal arguments as to why it was within the Administration's right to require the broadcasts. During the meeting, Jimenez mentioned a newspaper story covering the Taiwan, El Salvador and Honduras trade deal in which Zelaya was cut out of the picture with the other officials. (NOTE: Jimenez recounted the same incident on June 18 in a live televised debate, which leads Post to believe that it was the catalyst for the media blitz. END NOTE.) Jimenez also criticized the "power centers" consisting of press owners such as Jaime Rosenthal, Rafael Ferrari, and Jorge Canahuati, who, according to Jimenez, manipulate information yet lack the status of elected officials. Jimenez did not offer the other side of the story surrounding these issues, nor did he mention any other possible remedies that Zelaya could have taken.

¶5. (SBU) Honduran television and radio stations lashed out against the national broadcasts. The Honduran Journalism Association (CPH) and other media sources characterized the events as major impositions on free speech, infringements on private business, and breaches of human rights. The CPH reminded President Zelaya that excesses in the media are generally less harmful than restrictions. The press also compared these broadcasts to Chavez's decision not to renew RCTV's license in Venezuela. In protest of Zelaya's decision, Honduran newspapers refused to cover and/or print the transcripts of the obligatory broadcasts. On June 2, the

Ambassador held his annual media day reception at the official residence for prominent Honduran journalists in which he and many of the attendees discussed freedom of speech in Honduras.

¶6. (U) While Zelaya's decision engendered ardent opposition in the media, the response in the political arena was more mixed. Before the broadcasts began, National Congress President Roberto Michelletti of the Liberal Party publicly urged the President not to require their airing. Congressman Antonio Rivera also unsuccessfully motioned to overrule the decision by Zelaya. National Party President Lobo criticized Zelaya for never addressing the question of corruption in HONDUTEL during the first broadcast. Several politicians, including former Presidential candidate Olban Valladares, referred to the broadcast requirement as authoritarian, comparing it to similar measures taken in Ecuador and Venezuela. Political supporters of the broadcasts framed the issue as a matter of allowing the GOH its own right to practice free speech.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite intense attention from media and political players, much of the public response has focused on the decision to require national broadcasting by the GOH rather than the content of the broadcasts themselves. This emphasis occurred not only as a result of public resistance to the idea but also because of the newspapers' refusal to cover the substance of the broadcasts. The Administration's ultimate goal of reaching out to the public and countering negative publicity by means of television and radio has proven largely ineffective and counterproductive. Zelaya's controversial broadcasting has come at a vulnerable time in his Administration; recent Gallup poll results reveal that confidence in the President has decreased significantly. Only fifty percent of those polled responded that Zelaya "always or almost always does what is best for the country", showing a sixteen point decrease in popularity since January ¶2007. The fact that the Administration's media blitz occurred at the same time as the termination of RCTV in Venezuela may be purely coincidental, but Zelaya recently referred to Chavez in terms of oil as a "friend" and has called for Honduras to distance itself from transnationals like Texaco

and Shell.

18. (SBU) COMMENT (CONT.): Zelaya's mandatory national broadcasts reflect a weakened President anxious to regain control of and trust from a skeptical and pessimistic population, but there is some truth to what the Zelaya Administration is saying about the press. On the cover of the June 16 edition of the local conservative newspaper, El Herald, the headline read, "Torrijos Signs Free Trade with Honduras" (not "with Zelaya") and included a photo of Panamanian President Torrijos alone that cut out Zelaya next to him. Over the last few months the press has largely been ignoring President Zelaya and friction with him continues in the aftermath of the media blitz. The remedy that the Zelaya Administration used to seek support and respect was misguided, but the underlying problems of a weakened Presidency and tension with the press remain. END COMMENT.
WILLIARD